



VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Office of Tribal Government Relations

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2018




U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

# Summary Report on VA Claims Events in Indian Country:

**A Guide for Best Practice**



Office of  
Tribal Government  
Relations



**In late 2017**, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs sent the following letter to tribal leaders across the nation to invite them to participate in a 2018 campaign in which VA visited tribal lands to share information and encourage Native American Veterans to submit claims for disability compensation and other benefits.



*VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and Senator Dan Sullivan meeting with Alaska Native Veterans.*





# Dear Tribal Leader Letter



October 30, 2017

Dear Tribal Leader:

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is writing to ask tribal governments interested in participating in a nationwide outreach campaign to reply to this letter within 30 days of receipt. The focus of the outreach campaign will be identifying and assisting Veterans across Indian Country with presumptive disabilities and Veterans who may have noncompensable disabilities (VA pension claims). Reaching these Veterans could have a direct, tangible impact on the lives of thousands of previously unreached Veterans and their spouses.


Presumptive Conditions and VA Pension Benefits are defined as:

Veterans with **presumptive disabilities**. Veterans may not realize that VA presumes that certain medical conditions are related to military service, although these conditions may first appear after discharge from the military. These conditions may qualify for compensation payments. See the enclosed fact sheet for more information, or visit <http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/presumption.pdf>.

In addition, surviving spouses may be eligible for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), when Veterans die as a result of these presumptive disabilities. See the enclosed fact sheet or visit <http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/survivors/dic.pdf> for additional DIC eligibility.

VA can pay special monthly compensation additional allowances to a Veteran who, as a result of military service, incurred the loss or loss of use of specific organs or extremities, and to a Veteran or Survivors who need regular assistance with activities of daily living, or when they are confined to their immediate premises because of disabilities, i.e., an Aid





and Attendance or Housebound allowance. See the enclosed fact sheets for more information, or visit: <http://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/smc.pdf>

Veterans who may be eligible to receive **VA pension benefits**. VA pension is a needs-based benefit paid to wartime Veterans who meet certain age or non-service connected disability requirements. See the enclosed fact sheet for more information, or visit: <http://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/limitedincome/livepension.pdf>

VA can pay special monthly pension additional allowances when a Veteran or surviving spouse needs regular assistance with activities of daily living or when they are confined to their immediate premises because of disabilities, i.e., an Aid and Attendance or Housebound allowance. See the enclosed fact sheet for more information, or visit: <http://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/limitedincome/EnhancedorSpecialPension.pdf>

VA will work with local service providers to ensure interested tribes receive the information listed above, and more general information, via:

1. **Claims and health fairs**—These onsite events may include: accepting claims; checking the status of claims; processing specific types of claims (identified beforehand); health eligibility screening; health benefits enrollment; blood pressure checks; and other medical screenings.
2. **Teleconferences**—The services offered onsite during claims fairs may be available through such technologies as video teleconferences, conference calls, Telehealth, etc. While access to such technology may be limited, where available, it can still greatly assist with access to benefits for Veterans and their Survivors living in Indian Country.

If your tribe is interested in participating in this focused outreach campaign, please reply to [tribalgovernmentconsultation@va.gov](mailto:tribalgovernmentconsultation@va.gov) no later than 30 days from the date of this letter. VA will consider all tribes that express interest, and it will consult tribal leadership as it plans and coordinates all outreach events.

**Mike Frueh**  
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Executive Director  
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*VA Alaska Team getting ready to fly out to Unalakleet, AK, for a claims event.*





*Tule River Tribal Veterans posting colors to kick off a claims event.*



*Left: Robertson Yazzie, Readjustment Counselor, VHA Vet Center Outstation on Navajo Reservation. Right: Veronica Duncan, Supervisory Counselor, VHA Vet Center Outstations on San Carlos, Navajo, and Hopi Reservations. March 21, 2018 • VA Claims Event Tselani Cottonwood Chapter*

## Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) continually works to build relationships with tribal governments and support the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Veterans who have sacrificed for their country. In recognition of the government-to-government relationship between the United States government and tribal nations, VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) maintains an ongoing partnership with tribes by helping VA facilitate formal consultations, facilitate intergovernmental site visits, coordinate annual Veterans Training Summits, and foster strategic communication and outreach. A primary focus of OTGR is to connect Indian Country's Veterans with the benefits they earned through their military service.

American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the U.S. military at a higher rate per capita than people of any other ethnic group. However, AI/AN Veterans frequently face challenges to accessing VA benefits, programs, and services. These barriers may include remote locations, limited internet connectivity, hesitance to access VA programs and benefits due to a perceived lack of culturally competent services, and mistrust of the federal government.

In 2018, VA prioritized outreach to AI/AN Veterans who have disabilities or illnesses that VA presumes are related to their military service, such as Vietnam Veterans with conditions tied to contact with Agent Orange in Vietnam. This report describes how VA engaged with tribes and AI/AN Veterans in 2018 to bring benefits to Veterans who experience presumptive conditions.



*Left Foreground: Harry Miller, Public Outreach Specialist, VBA Phoenix Regional Office. August 3, 2018*

## VA Outreach in Indian Country

To honor tribal sovereignty and connect tribal Veterans with services and benefits, VA OTGR engages in formal tribal consultation and holds outreach events throughout Indian Country. In previous years, these events have included benefits fairs; Veterans Training Summits, where guests can learn more about VA benefits and services; and Veterans Stand Down events, which provide services and supplies for homeless Veterans. (See the [OTGR 2017 Executive Summary Report](#) and [OTGR 2016 Tribal Consultation Report](#) for more information about these ongoing outreach efforts.)

In 2018, VA conducted focused outreach to connect with Veterans in Indian Country who experience certain conditions that VA presumes are related to their military service. Throughout 2018, OTGR conducted a special campaign to reach tribal Veterans who have these conditions, during which VA held events on tribal lands across Indian Country. For many tribal Veterans, VA's visits to their communities for this special campaign offered their first-ever opportunity to interact with VA. Some of the Veterans who attended the outreach events submitted claims to VA for the first time.

### Compensation, Pension, and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation

VA offers the following programs for Veterans who experience illness or disability:

- monthly compensation for Veterans with conditions related to, caused by, or worsened by, their military service, including many conditions that occur years after service;



- needs-based pensions for Veterans age 65 or older who have disabilities that are not connected to their service;
- additional monthly compensation for Veterans who lost the use of specific organs or extremities due to their service, need support with activities of daily living, or have a disability that confines them to their immediate area; and
- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for a spouse who survived the death of a Veteran due to a condition connected to their service.

To begin receiving disability compensation for any qualifying condition, a Veteran must file a benefits claim. Spouses who survived the death of a Veteran due to a service-connected condition, including presumptive conditions, may be eligible to receive DIC.

## Presumptive Conditions

Based on medical research, VA presumes that some conditions that arise years after service were caused by an event that occurred during service. These conditions are called **presumptive conditions**. Some Veterans may be unaware that an illness or disability that developed after their military service could qualify as a presumptive condition, thus entitling them to compensation payments from VA. Informing these Veterans and their families about their eligibility can enhance their wellbeing by helping them obtain compensation and connect with other benefits, including health care, housing and education, life insurance, pension, economic empowerment, and more.



*Army Veterans Andre West, Oklahoma City Vet Center, and Eric Grothaus, Oklahoma City VA Health Care System, Medical Administration Service.*



*Seminole Nation Presumptive Event, Kathy Bennet, Muskogee VA Medical Center, assisting to a Tribal Veteran with medical eligibility enrollment during a claims event.*

## What are presumptive conditions?

Some Veterans develop health conditions due to unique circumstances of the environments or situations in which they served. For example, if a Veteran who was exposed to radiation during their service later develops thyroid cancer, VA presumes the condition is tied to their service. VA considers Veterans who served in the following situations and now experience specific illnesses to have presumptive conditions:

- Former Prisoners of War (FPOWs) with a qualifying condition that is at least 10 percent disabling;
- Vietnam Veterans who served in the Republic of Vietnam between January 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975, and were exposed to Agent Orange;
- Gulf War Veterans who served in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations and have a qualifying condition that is at least 10 percent disabling, which is diagnosed before December 31, 2021; and
- Veterans who were exposed to ionizing radiation and who also either:
  - ◆ participated in atmospheric nuclear testing;
  - ◆ occupied or were prisoners of war in Hiroshima or Nagasaki;
  - ◆ served at a diffusion plant in Paducah, KY; Portsmouth, OH; or Oak Ridge, TN, before February 1, 1992; or
  - ◆ served at Amchitka Island, AK, prior to January 1, 1974.

See [Appendix B: Presumptive Disability Benefits Fact Sheet](#) for a list of specific diseases and disabilities that qualify as presumptive conditions for each of the four categories above.

In 2017, VA began to formally recognize certain conditions related to service at Camp Lejeune or Marine Corps Air Station New River in North Carolina between August 1953 through December 1987 as eligible for presumptive disability compensation. Those who served here during this time period may have encountered contaminated drinking water linked to several diseases. Veterans who meet this description and have one or more of the following diagnoses may qualify for compensation:

- adult leukemia,
- aplastic anemia and other myelodysplastic syndromes,
- bladder cancer,
- kidney cancer,
- liver cancer,
- multiple myeloma,
- non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, or
- Parkinson's Disease.

In addition to those who fit the above criteria for presumptive conditions, Veterans may be eligible for disability compensation who:

- receive diagnosis of certain chronic diseases within a year of release from active duty or
- are diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) at any point after discharge.

See [Appendix B](#) for a detailed list of chronic conditions that VA classifies as presumptive.

## Presumptive Conditions Outreach Campaign

In FY2017, VA estimated a total U.S. Veteran population of 19,902,577. During the 2017 fiscal year, VA successfully connected many of these Veterans with benefits and entitlements. For example:

- the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) completed nearly 1.39 million claims for compensation;
- VA guaranteed more than 740,000 home loans;



*Left Rear: Lea Gould, Coach, VBA Phoenix Regional Office. Right Rear: Monica Cabrera, Public Affairs Officer, VBA Phoenix Regional Office. Front: Spouse of Veteran and Veteran.*





In total, VA held **34 claims events** in partnership with **25 tribes** across **12 states**.

An estimated **1,116 Veterans** participated and submitted a total of **737 claims** for VA benefits during the 2018 campaign.

- more than 6.7 million users registered for the eBenefits system by the end of FY2017; and
- VA paid more than \$2.2 billion in life insurance benefits.

While many Veterans connected with a variety of VA benefits in FY2017, VA recognized a need to focus on reaching Veterans in tribal communities.

To expand the reach of Veterans' benefits in Indian Country, VA conducted a targeted outreach campaign in 2018 to identify Veterans throughout Indian Country who have presumptive conditions and help them submit claims for compensation and sign up for other benefits. The goal of the events was to support Veterans in completing as much of their claims as possible onsite, thereby reducing the processing and approval time-frames. VBA, OTGR, and VA's Center for Minority Veterans partnered to design this outreach campaign. To host the events, they collaborated with tribal governments and other partners, including states and Veterans Service Officers (VSOs), to plan, promote, and execute the events.


In the fall 2017, VA disseminated a letter to tribal leaders across the nation to inform them of the upcoming presumptive conditions outreach campaign. Within the letter, VA requested



*Stephanie Birdwell, Mary Culley and Lt. Gov Jefferson Keel, President NCAI, at the National Indian Health Board Conference, Oklahoma City, OK*

responses from tribes interested in participating in the campaign via claims events or teleconferences. VA held claims events in collaboration with every tribe that responded affirmatively to the letter.

The campaign aimed to make a direct, tangible effect on the lives of many previously unreached Veterans and their spouses. On many tribal lands that VA visited during this campaign, event participants reported that this event was the first time VA had ever visited their community. These events offered Veterans who had never interacted with the VBA the opportunity to ask questions, seek assistance with filing claims, and sign up for other benefits. Many of the event participants had never previously filed for benefits, did not realize they were entitled to certain benefits, or were unaware of recent legislative changes that granted them eligibility for benefits. By bringing information to the Veterans in their home communities, VA supported many Veterans in submitting compensation claims onsite. Additionally, VBA staff were available to help event attendees learn about and sign up for other benefits, including housing and education assistance.



*“With the focus on Veterans with presumptive conditions and those who are pension-eligible, VA is hopeful we can help Veterans across Indian Country access the full range of benefits they have courageously earned through their service.”*

**- Stephanie Birdwell, Director, VA Office of Tribal Government Relations**

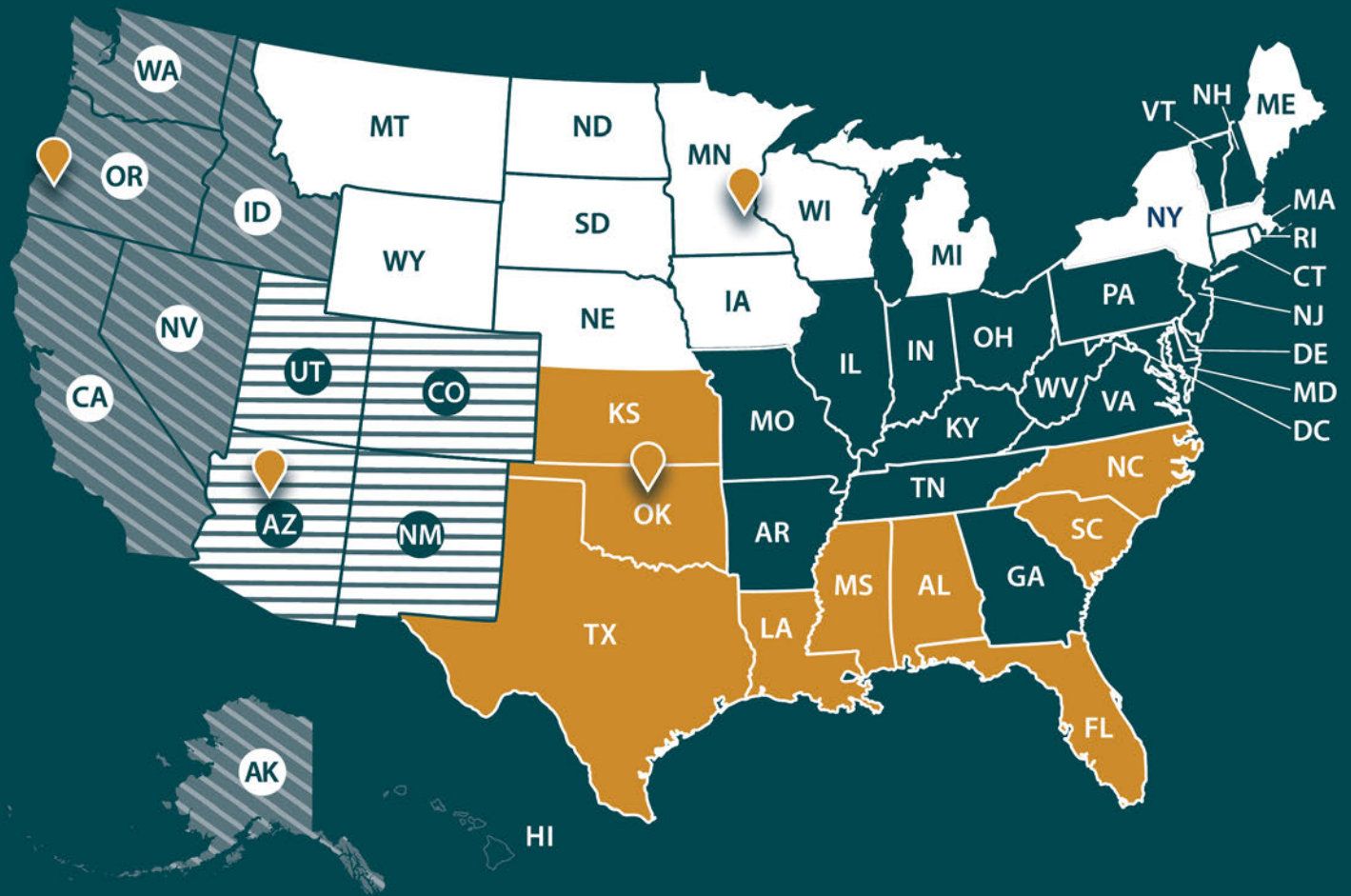


By providing a forum for face-to-face information sharing, networking, and learning about one another, these events promoted relationship building between VA and tribal Veterans. These interactions helped VBA learn more about the people they serve who reside in Indian Country and created a foundation of trust among tribal Veterans. Although the events have concluded for now, VA is still actively following up with Veterans as their claims go through the review process. Beyond creating rapport with individual Veterans, VA's efforts in Indian Country have also helped them earn the trust and partnership of tribal governments. Since the events concluded, several tribes have contacted their VA regional office to request future claims events.

## Outreach Events by Region

OTGR employs four regional specialists who collaborate with tribes and strengthen relationships with tribal Veterans in their designated areas. Figure 1 illustrates the area each regional specialist covers and the number of presumptive conditions outreach events held in each area.

**Figure 1:** A map of areas covered by each regional specialist



### Regional Contacts:



**Terry Bentley:** Alaska, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Washington



**Mary Culley:** Alabama, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas



**Homana Pawiki:** Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah



**Peter Vicaire:** Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming



## Contacting VA's Office of Tribal Government Relations



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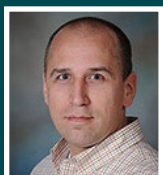


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*Seminole Nation Color Guard and Mary Culley, at a Seminole Nation Presumptive Event, in Seminole, OK.*

## Outreach Events at a Glance

Table 1 summarizes the number of events held and tribes served by each of the four OTGR regional specialists. The following sections provide further details on individual claims events by region.

**Table 1.** States, regions, and number of outreach events covered by each regional specialist

Regional Specialist	Region(s)	States	Number of Events	Number of Tribes Served
Terry Bentley	Pacific	Alaska, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Washington	8	8
Mary Culley	Continental, Midwest, and Southeast	Alabama, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas	6	5
Homana Pawiki	Pacific and Continental	Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah	18	7
Peter Vicaire	Continental, Midwest, North Atlantic, and Southeast	Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming	3	3

### VA OTGR Regional Specialist: Homana Pawiki

**18 events** throughout Arizona and New Mexico

**2,320** estimated attendees





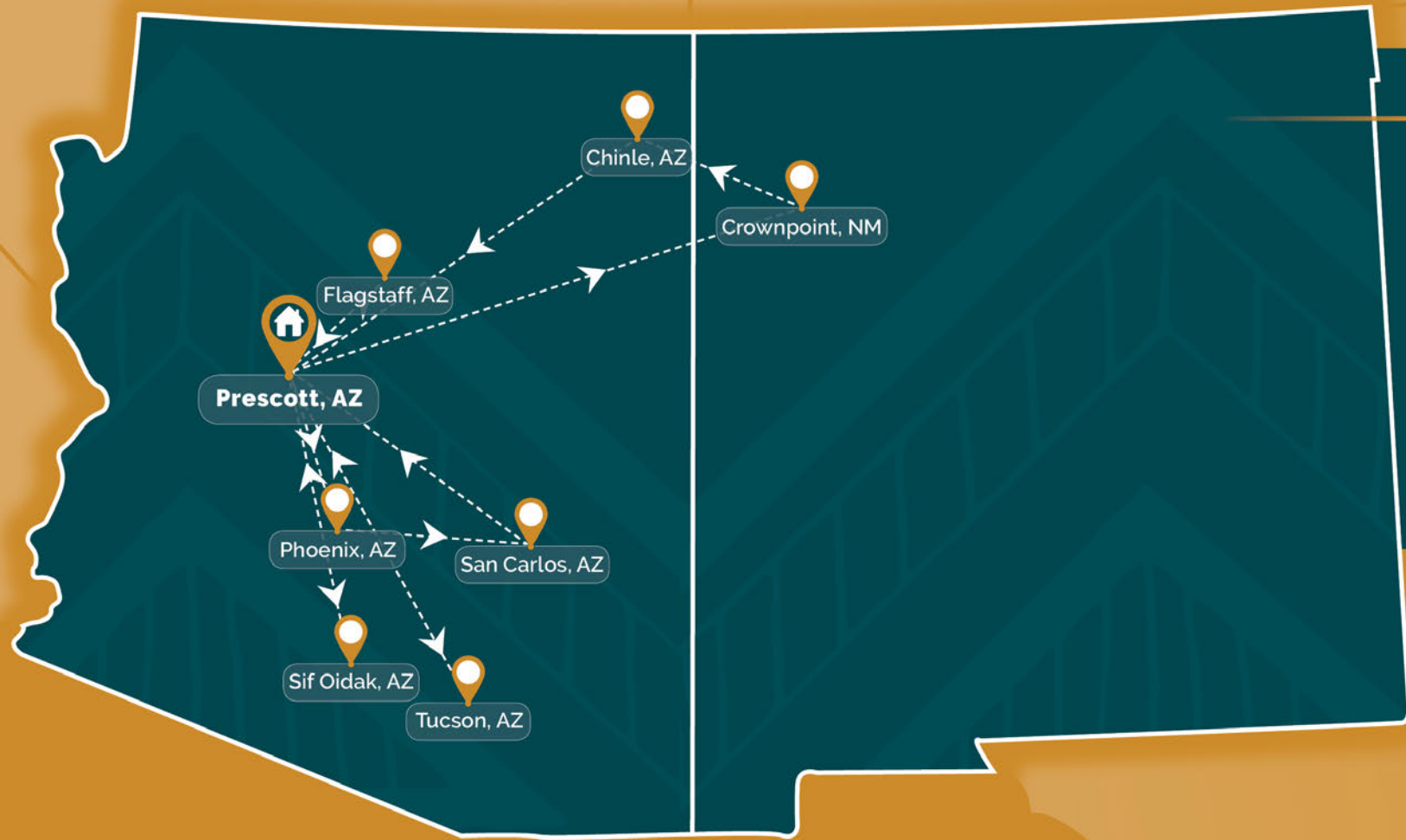
*Terry Bentley at the Copper River Native Association for the VA Claims Clinic event.*

## Outreach Events in the Continental and Pacific Regions

**Table 2.** Continental and Pacific Regions outreach events

Host Tribe or Organization	Date(s)	Location
Navajo Nation	March 20, 2018	Many Farms, AZ
Navajo Nation	March 21, 2018	Cottonwood, AZ
Navajo Nation	April 10, 2018	Kayenta, AZ
Navajo Nation	April 12, 2018	Shiprock, NM
Navajo Nation	May 8, 2018	Tuba City, AZ
Navajo Nation	May 10, 2018	St. Michaels, AZ
Navajo Nation	June 12, 2018	Crownpoint, NM
Navajo Nation	June 14, 2018	Chinle, AZ
Navajo Nation	June 29–30, 2018	Flagstaff, AZ
Navajo Nation	September 16, 2018	Shiprock, NM
Pascua Yaqui Tribe	June 23, 2018	Tucson, AZ
Pueblo of Pojoaque	May 18, 2018	Santa Fe, NM
San Carlos Apache Nation	August 4, 2018	San Carlos, AZ
Santo Domingo Pueblo	May 16, 2018	Kewa Pueblo, NM
Taos Pueblo	April 14, 2018	Taos Pueblo, NM
Tohono O'odham Nation	April 28, 2018	Sells, AZ
Tohono O'odham Nation	July 21, 2018	Sif Oidak, AZ
Tohono O'odham Nation	October 27, 2018	Topawa, AZ





## Travel for Homana Pawiki from June to early August 2018

From	To	Miles (One Way)	Date
Prescott, AZ (Home)	Crownpoint, NM (1)	335	6/12/18
Crownpoint, NM	Chinle, AZ (2)	131	6/14/18
Chinle, AZ	Prescott, AZ (Home)	262	6/15/18
Prescott, AZ (Home)	Tucson, AZ	213	6/23/18
Tucson, AZ	Prescott, AZ (Home)	213	6/24/18
Prescott, AZ (Home)	Flagstaff, AZ	95	6/29/18
Flagstaff, AZ	Prescott, AZ (Home)	95	6/30/18
Prescott, AZ (Home)	Sif Oidak, AZ	183	7/21/18
Sif Oidak, AZ	Prescott, AZ (Home)	183	7/22/18
Prescott, AZ (Home)	Phoenix, AZ	101	7/30/18
Phoenix, AZ	San Carlos, AZ	109	8/2/18
San Carlos, AZ	Phoenix, AZ	109	8/3/18
Phoenix, AZ	Prescott, AZ (Home)	101	8/4/18

## Leveraging Partnerships to Reach Veterans

VA personnel traveled to Arizona from June through early August 2018 to connect with AI/AN Veterans through two concurrent events: the IHS partnership conference and a claims event on the San Carlos Apache Reservation.

On August 2, VA hosted a claims event in partnership with the San Carlos Apache Tribe. The tribal radio station and newspaper, as well as a local newspaper, successfully promoted the event to local Veterans. Through this effort, VA helped 29 Veterans connect with benefits.

At the San Carlos Apache outreach event, **13 Veterans** completed claims.

During the events held on the Tohono O'odham Nation, **14 Veterans** submitted claims onsite.

In the events held in coordination with Navajo Nation, **113 Veterans** submitted claims onsite.



*Vesta Burkett, Public Outreach Specialist, VBA Phoenix Regional Office.*



*Veterans getting assistance during the intake process at a Tule River Tribe Claims Event.*

The presumptive conditions outreach events launched at the Many Farms and Cottonwood Chapter Houses on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. The inaugural event, held in March 2018, marked the first-ever event hosted by a tribe on tribal lands that focused on connecting Veterans with disability compensation and pension claims. At this event, 88 Veterans participated, and VA processed 49 claims.

VA partnered with Navajo Nation to hold eight additional events targeted to Veterans on Navajo lands. Additionally, VA held an outreach event in conjunction with the annual Navajo Nation Veterans Summit in Flagstaff, AZ. In partnership with the Tohono O'odham Nation, VA held three outreach events within Tohono O'odham communities.

Holding claims events in convenient locations on tribal lands and near the Veterans' homes encouraged attendance and increased the number of Veterans who completed claims onsite. In several instances, Veterans easily returned home to gather necessary documents or visited their nearby Indian Health Service (IHS) facility to obtain medical records and returned to the event to submit their claim on the same day.

### ***Outreach Events in the Continental, Midwest, North Atlantic, and Southeastern Regions***

**Table 3.** Continental, Midwest, North Atlantic, and Southeastern Region outreach events

Host Tribe or Organization	Date(s)	Location
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma	July 10	McAlester, OK
Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma	July 17	Poteau, OK



Host Tribe or Organization	Date(s)	Location
Kiowa Tribe	August 16–17	Anadarko, OK
Osage Nation	May 7–8	Ponca City, OK
Seminole Nation of Oklahoma	April 17–18	Seminole, OK
Shawnee Tribe	July 31	Miami, OK

The tribal Veterans outreach events in Oklahoma attracted diverse participants across the six events:

- 285 attendees received assistance with claims and benefits,
- 150 participants represented 28 different tribes,
- 84 participants were non-Native,
- 39 Veterans were women, and
- 12 participants were spouses of deceased Veterans.

Participants in the events conveyed appreciation to VA for visiting their lands to assist them with the benefits application process. Bringing the resources to the Veterans significantly accelerated the process of submitting and receiving approval for claims. For example, a Veteran filed a compensation claim at the Kiowa event and received notification on the same day that VA had approved his claim and increased his disability compensation. At the event on Osage tribal lands, a Veteran submitted a claim on the first day of the event and, on the second day, received approval for his request for increased compensation. He learned that VA would apply the increased rate retroactively in the amount of approximately \$20,000. Upon hearing this news, the Veteran called his American Legion commander who had encouraged him to attend the claims event. The commander was moved to tears by the quick resolution.

*“This was the first time I ever did any paperwork for a claim. I am so pleased. I got my paperwork done and got all my questions answered.”*

**- An Air Force Veteran helped at the Seminole Nation claims event**

## VA OTGR Regional Specialist: Terry Bentley

**8 events** across **6 states**

**516** estimated attendees

At the Seminole Nation event, a young Veteran arrived who had driven for more than two hours to attend, at the urging of a Veterans Service Organization in her town. The Veteran explained to VA personnel that she feared she would soon become homeless, and that this event was her last hope in receiving approval for her claim. The next morning, after VA staff helped her file a claim, VBA contacted her to inform her that not only did they approve her claim, but they would also provide her with back-pay for several years.

A Vietnam Veteran attended the Seminole Nation event with his wife, who did not have health insurance coverage. VA determined that because of the Veteran's disability status, his wife was eligible for VA health coverage. The couple expressed gratitude for VA's assistance, stating that they had not known this coverage was an option. In another example, a widow who attended the Shawnee event learned that she likely qualifies to receive a widow's pension from VA.

### *Outreach Events in the Pacific Region*

**Table 4.** Pacific Region outreach events

Host Tribe or Organization	Date(s)	Location
Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon	June 15–16	Lincoln City, OR
Copper River Native Association	May 9–13	Glennallen, AK
Nez Perce Tribe	June 12–13	Lewiston, ID
Native Village of Unalakleet and Native Village of White Mountain	June 5–6	Nome and Unalakleet, AK
Nooksack Indian Tribe	June 13–15	Everson, WA
Tule River Tribe	May 16	Porterville, CA
Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone Indians	October 20-21	Elko, NV
Walker River Paiute Tribe	October 24	Schurz, NV

Veterans and their families who attended the events, as well as the tribal leaders who helped coordinate the events, expressed appreciation to VA for bringing resources and assistance to their communities. Typically, Veterans who live in tribal communities must drive for several hours to reach the closest VA regional office, so hosting an event in their community greatly increased accessibility. These events helped create a foundation of trust and strengthen

partnerships between VA and the tribes, which may encourage more tribal Veterans to work with VA and submit claims in the future.

In addition to filing, following up on, and asking questions about claims, several Veterans signed up for VA health care during these events. Several others requested headstones or grave markers for deceased Veterans in their communities. Across the two Alaska events, 20 Veterans submitted new claims, and 7 signed up for VA healthcare for the first time.



*Terry Bentley & Jeff Kowchee, Tribal Veterans Representative for White Mountain Native Village, during the claims event held in Nome, AK.*

At the Nez Perce Tribe's event, 12 attendees submitted benefits claims. Several Veterans came to tears when explaining that this event marked the first time they had ever filed for benefits. During the Tule River event, 18 participants submitted claims. A Veteran who attended this event resubmitted a claim he originally attempted to submit in 2015. VA approved his claim and awarded him back-pay dating back to 2015.

## Outreach Events in the Midwest Region

**Table 5.** Midwest Region outreach events

Host Tribe	Date(s)	Location
Bay Mills Indian Community	July 30 & August 1	Brimley, MI
Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa	June 13–15	Red Cliff, WI
White Earth Nation	September 20	Mahnomen, MN

The presumptive conditions outreach events in the Midwest region served as a platform for trust-building and a springboard for future collaboration with the tribes. The Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa expressed interest in hosting another event in collaboration with VA in the summer 2019. Veterans of the Bay Mills Indian Community expressed gratitude for VA's visit to their remote reservation in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. To staff the outreach event at the Red Cliff Community Health Center in Bayfield, WI, four representatives from the Milwaukee VA Regional Office traveled more than 350 miles.

## VA OTGR Regional Specialist: Peter Vicaire

**3 events** across **3 states**

**90** estimated attendees







*Nevada State Department of Veterans Services Team with Terry Bentley during a claims event held in Elko, NV.*

## Conclusion

Through the 33 claims events held throughout Indian Country, VA assisted with compensation, pension benefits claims, DIC, and service-connected ratings, reviews, and upgrades. These events also provided a forum for connecting Veterans and their families with benefits ranging from health coverage to housing and education assistance. This outreach effort created opportunities for networking and relationship building between VA and tribal governments and Veterans. VA is committed to continued outreach and collaboration with tribal governments and Veterans in Indian Country.



*Left: Eagle staff stands with Flags at a Nooksack Tribe claims event in Everson, WA.  
Right: Terry Bentley with Tribal Veterans Representatives receiving training in Elko, NV.*

# Appendix A: Abbreviations, Terms, and Definitions

Abbreviations/ Terms	Definitions
<b>Compensation</b>	VA disability compensation is a monthly, tax-free payment to Veterans who got sick or injured while serving in the military, or whose service worsened an existing condition. Veterans must file a claim and receive VA approval to receive compensation. Compensation is not predicated on income.
<b>DIC</b>	Dependency and Indemnity Compensation
<b>FPOW</b>	Former Prisoner of War
<b>IHS</b>	Indian Health Service
<b>OTGR</b>	Office of Tribal Government Relations
<b>NCA</b>	National Cemetery Administration
<b>Pension</b>	VA pension benefits provide tax-free monthly payments to wartime Veterans who have limited or no income and meet certain age or disability requirements.
<b>RO</b>	Regional Office
<b>VA</b>	U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
<b>VBA</b>	Veterans Benefits Administration
<b>VHA</b>	Veterans Health Administration
<b>VSO</b>	Veterans Service Officer

# Appendix B: Presumptive Disability Benefits Fact Sheet

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## Presumptive Disability Benefits

### What is “Presumptive” Service Connection?

VA presumes that certain disabilities were caused by military service. This is because of the unique circumstances of a specific Veteran's military service. If a presumed condition is diagnosed in a Veteran in a certain group, they can be awarded disability compensation.

### What Are “Presumptive” Conditions?

If you are diagnosed with a chronic disease within one year of active duty release, you should apply for disability compensation. Examples of chronic disease include: arthritis, diabetes or hypertension.

Or, if you served continuously for at least 90 days and are diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) after discharge, you can establish service connection for the disease.

Veterans in the following groups may qualify for “presumptive” disability benefits:

- Former prisoners of war who:
  - ◆ Have a condition that is at least 10 percent disabling
- Vietnam Veterans who were:
  - ◆ Exposed to Agent Orange
  - ◆ Served in the Republic of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975
- Atomic Veterans exposed to ionizing radiation and who experienced one of the following:
  - ◆ Participated in atmospheric nuclear testing
  - ◆ Occupied or were prisoners of war in Hiroshima or Nagasaki
  - ◆ Served before Feb. 1, 1992, at a diffusion plant in Paducah, Kentucky; Portsmouth, Ohio; or Oak Ridge, Tennessee
  - ◆ Served before Jan. 1, 1974, at Amchitka Island, Alaska
- Gulf War Veterans who:
  - ◆ Served in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations
  - ◆ Have a condition that is at least 10 percent disabling by Dec. 31, 2021



See the table below for specific presumed conditions for these groups:

Former Prisoners of War	Vietnam Veterans	Atomic Veterans	Gulf War Veterans
<p><b>Imprisoned for any length of time:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychosis</li> <li>• Any anxiety state</li> <li>• Dysthymic disorder</li> <li>• Organic residuals of frostbite</li> <li>• Post-traumatic osteoarthritis</li> <li>• Heart disease or hypertensive vascular disease</li> <li>• Stroke and the residual effects</li> </ul> <p><b>Imprisoned for at least 30 days:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beriberi</li> <li>• Chronic dysentery</li> <li>• Helminthiasis</li> <li>• Malnutrition (including optic atrophy)</li> <li>• Pellagra</li> <li>• Other nutritional deficiencies</li> <li>• Irritable bowel syndrome</li> <li>• Peptic ulcer disease</li> <li>• Peripheral neuropathy</li> <li>• Cirrhosis of the liver</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AL amyloidosis</li> <li>• B-cell leukemia</li> <li>• Chronic lymphocytic leukemia</li> <li>• Type 2 diabetes</li> <li>• Hodgkin's disease</li> <li>• Ischemic heart disease</li> <li>• Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma</li> <li>• Parkinson's disease</li> <li>• Prostate cancer</li> <li>• Respiratory cancers</li> <li>• Soft-tissue sarcoma (not including osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma or mesothelioma)</li> </ul> <p><b>The following conditions, if they become greater than 10 percent debilitating within a year of exposure to an herbicide agent:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy</li> <li>• Chloracne or other similar acne-form disease</li> <li>• Porphyria cutanea tarda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All forms of leukemia, except chronic lymphocytic leukemia</li> <li>• Cancer of the thyroid, breast, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, pancreas, bile ducts, gall bladder, salivary gland, urinary tract, brain, bone, lung, colon or ovary</li> <li>• Bronchiolo Alveolar carcinoma</li> <li>• Multiple myeloma</li> <li>• Lymphomas, other than Hodgkin's disease</li> <li>• Primary liver cancer, except if there are indications of cirrhosis or hepatitis B</li> </ul>	<p><b>Medically unexplained chronic multi-symptom illnesses that exist for six months or more, such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chronic fatigue syndrome</li> <li>• Fibromyalgia</li> <li>• Irritable bowel syndrome</li> <li>• Any diagnosed or undiagnosed illness that warrants a presumption of service connection, as determined by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs</li> </ul> <p><b>Signs or symptoms of an undiagnosed illness include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Skin symptoms</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Muscle pain</li> <li>• Joint pain</li> <li>• Neurological symptoms</li> <li>• Sleep disturbance</li> <li>• GI symptoms</li> <li>• Cardiovascular symptoms</li> <li>• Weight loss</li> <li>• Menstrual disorders</li> </ul>

# Appendix C: Outreach Materials

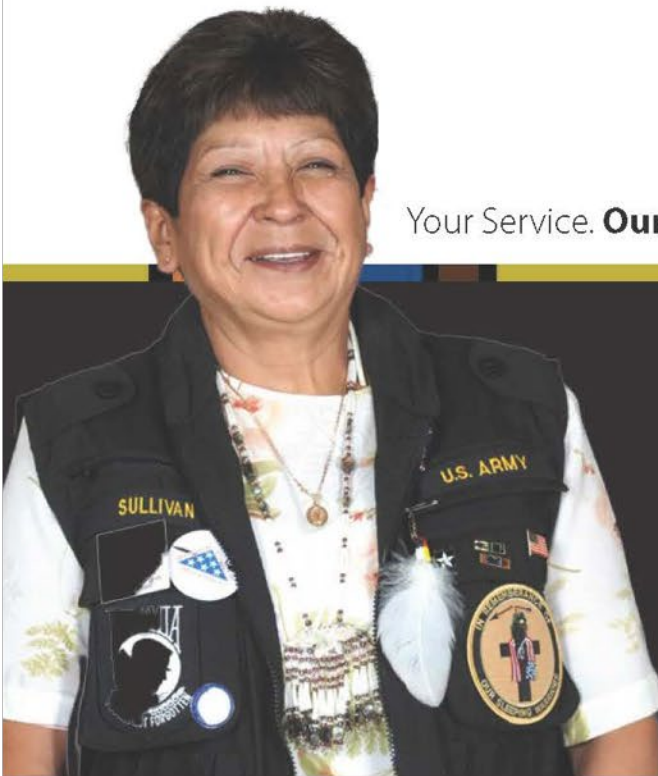
VA used an event flyer and event packet to promote the benefits claims events among AI/AN Veterans. The packet shares information such as what Veterans should bring with them to the event. These materials are customizable for different locations and dates.

**Event Flyer (1 page)**

**Event Packet (5 pages)**



*Tule River Tribal Veterans*



**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Your Service. **Our Mission.**

VA WILL BE HOLDING A

**Bringing VA Benefits  
Home event** in your  
hometown.



**During the event, you can:**

- ✓ Speak with a VA representative
- ✓ Get answers to VA claim and benefits questions
- ✓ File your claim
- ✓ Get same-day decisions when you share complete information



**EVENT DATE & TIME/S:**

**LOCATION:**

**POINT OF CONTACT:**

**PHONE NUMBER:**





**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# YOUR SERVICE. OUR MISSION.

**Bringing VA Benefits Home**



## Event Packet



Office of  
**Tribal Government**  
Relations

## What is a Bringing VA Benefits Home Event?

The Bringing Benefits Home Event gives Veterans and their families the opportunity to talk with a VA representative about the VA disability claim process and any other VA-related questions. The event allows you to speak directly with a VA representative in person or via TeleBenefits.

### *Here's what you can expect during the event:*

- ✓ When you arrive, you will be asked to sign in and complete a form with your information and what VA benefits or services you are seeking.
- ✓ A staff member will assign you a waiting number.
- ✓ As soon as a VA staff member is available to help you, they will call your number for an interview.
- ✓ The staff member can answer your benefits-related questions and assist you with:
  - Filing a claim
  - Adding any evidence you bring with you to your VA claims file
  - Obtaining a Veterans Identification Card
  - Enrolling in eBenefits
  - ...and more!
- ✓ You'll be provided a list of next steps and any follow-up actions you may need to complete with VA.

#### NOTE



Keep in mind that wait times may be long depending on how many fellow Veterans and family members are attending the event. We encourage you to bring snacks and medications, if needed.

## What's In This Packet?

This packet includes important information and materials that will help you to prepare for the event.

### Summary of VA Benefits

#### Fact Sheets on the following topics:

- ✓ Intent to File
- ✓ VA Pension
- ✓ Decision Ready Claims
- ✓ Special Monthly Compensation
- ✓ Camp Lejeune: Veteran and Family Health & Disability Benefits
- ✓ Individual Unemployability (IU)
- ✓ Presumptive Disability Benefits
- ✓ Specially Adapted Housing Program
- ✓ C-123 Aircraft Agent Orange Exposure Claims
- ✓ Assistance for Homeless Veterans
- ✓ Disability Benefit Questionnaires (DBQs)
- ✓ Native American Direct Home Loan
- ✓ Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)
- ✓ Survivors Pension Benefit



#### DOWNLOAD FACT SHEETS

Fact sheets can also be found at <https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets.asp>.



## Before You Arrive: Preparing for Your Bringing VA Benefits Home Event

Review the following checklist before the event and gather any important information you'd like to bring with you to help make sure you get the most out of the Bringing VA Benefits Home Event.

### Review:

- ☐ Fact Sheets for the benefits you'd like to claim. Use the fact sheets in this packet for benefits such as Presumptive Conditions, Decision Ready Claims, Fully Developed Claims, Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs), and more, or find more information online at <https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets.asp>.

### Complete:

Depending on the benefits you're filing for, you may need to complete one or more of the following VA application forms. If you'd like to complete the forms before attending the event, you can find them online at [www.va.gov/vaforms](http://www.va.gov/vaforms). Otherwise, a VA staff member will provide them and help you complete them during the event.

- ☐ VA Form 21-0966, *Intent to file*
- ☐ VA Form 21-526ez, *Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits*
- ☐ VA Form 21-686c, *Declaration of Status of Dependents*
- ☐ VA Form 21-527ez, *Application for Pension*
- ☐ VA Form 21-8940, *Veterans Application for Increased Compensation Based on Unemployability*
- ☐ VA Form 21-4138, *Statement in Support of Claim*
- ☐ VA Form 21-534ez, *Application for DIC, Death Pension, and/or Accrued Benefits*
- ☐ VA Form 10-10ez, *Application for Health Benefits*

### Enroll In:

- ☐ eBenefits at [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov). eBenefits is an online portal that lets you submit an electronic claim, check the status of your claim, access important documents like your DD 214, and more with a Premium eBenefits account. A VA staff member can also help you enroll in eBenefits during the event.
- ☐ VA Health Care at [www.myhealthevet.va.gov](http://www.myhealthevet.va.gov). MyHealtheVet lets you access and manage your VA health records, track test results, refill prescriptions, and more.

### Bring with You:

- ☐ DD Form 214 (if available, not mandatory to have)
- ☐ Medical evidence to support your claim, including:
  - ☐ Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) completed by your primary care provider ([www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/dbq\\_disabilityexams.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/dbq_disabilityexams.asp))
  - ☐ VA Form 21-4142, *Authorization to Disclose Information to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)*
  - ☐ VA Form 21-2680, *Examination for Housebound Status or Permanent Need for Regular Aid and Attendance*
  - ☐ Any additional medical evidence with a diagnosis

## What's Next?

*Here's what to do after you leave the Bringing Benefits Home Event:*

- ✓ **If you submitted a claim at the event, check the status of your claim by logging into eBenefits at [www.ebenefits.va.gov](http://www.ebenefits.va.gov).**
- ✓ **If required, send VA any follow-up evidence to support your claim, by either:**
  - Uploading the evidence into eBenefits,
  - Fax copies toll free to: 844-531-7818, or
  - Mail copies to:  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Claims Intake Center  
PO Box 4444  
Janesville, WI 53547-4444
- ✓ **Contact VA if you have additional questions at 1-800-827-1000.**

*Follow-up Requirements Needed:*

☐ Condition/Claim

☐ Evidence of Event in Service

☐ Evidence of Disability/Continuity

☐ Evidence of Nexus

☐ Other



**Top left:** Stephanie Birdwell with Chickasaw Nation Lt. Gov. Jefferson Keel. **Top right:** Nooksack Tribal Veterans L-R, Elder Roberts and Robert Kelly at the Nooksack Tribe claims event in Everson, WA. **Center Right:** Dr. Rosa Borders, VHA Alaska, and Erin Gittens, VBA BAS, supporting the claims event held with the Copper River Native Association in Copper Center, AK. **Bottom:** Confederated Tribe of Siletz Indians Tribal Veterans, L-R – Tony Molina, Tribal Veterans Representative; Ed Ben, WWII Veteran; and Alan Fish.



**VA**



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**  
Office of Tribal Government Relations

[www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)